

Told at Twilight Stories

THE SINS OF SILVERTIP THE FOX

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JOHN BRECK



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THE SINS OF SILVERTIP
THE FOX

Told at Twilight Stories

By JOHN BRECK

MOSTLY ABOUT NIBBLE THE BUNNY
NIBBLE RABBIT MAKES MORE FRIENDS
THE SINS OF SILVERTIP THE FOX
TAD COON'S TRICKS
THE WAVY TAILED WARRIOR
TAD COON'S GREAT ADVENTURE
THE BAD LITTLE OWLS
THE JAY BIRD WHO WENT TAME



Silvertip wades across the pond.

Told at Twilight Stories

The Sins of Silvertip the Fox

by
John Breck



BOOK III

Illustrated by
William T. Andrews

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THE SINS OF SILVERTIP
THE FOX

THE SINS OF SILVERTIP THE FOX

CHAPTER I

HOW NIBBLE RESCUED THE RED COW

NEVER before, in the early, early spring, had there been so much excitement down at Doctor Muskrat's Pond. Of course, spring's the season for visitors. They were always on the lookout for old friends winging up from the south. The Beautiful Duck and his mate, who'd warned Nibble Rabbit about the Terrible Storm, stopped in to wish everyone a happy summer. Then they laughingly beaked their way northward through a flurry of late snow. Bad weather couldn't scare them now.

They kept a lookout for old enemies, too, as wise Woodsfolk always must. But there was one visitor who puzzled them. Was he an enemy, or was he a friend? Doctor Muskrat himself couldn't say. Or rather, he wouldn't. But that wasn't what started all the discussion.

The visitor was Tommy Peele. And his old dog Watch said he owned the Woods and Fields. Now did that mean he owned the Woodsfolk who lived in them? That's what everyone wanted to know. For the Woodsfolk were wild. Could a wild beast ever belong to any one? Doctor Muskrat had never heard of such a thing.

"I certainly wouldn't mind," chirped Cheewee the Chickadee. "I get a full crop 'most every time I see him."

"I guess you'd mind if he locked you up like he did Nibble," remarked Chaik

Jay. "That's what it means to belong to him."

"No, it doesn't," contradicted Nibble. (He really knew more about the little boy than any one else. He hadn't liked being locked up, but he did like Tommy.) "Watch says I belong to him just the same out of my cage as I did in it. And he feeds me just the same, too."

"Hmm!" sniffed Doctor Muskrat. He was wondering if it was that way with traps. 'Cause you remember Tommy'd caught him in one, and then let him go again. And Tommy'd fed him, too.

"You know," said Nibble, "all the beasts up at the barn say——" And then for the first time he heard the swishing in the bulrushes behind him.

"Ow!" he squealed. And he jumped. For the starey eyes of the cross Red Cow came peering through them.

“Swish!” went Doctor Muskrat through his hole in the ice. “Flutter!” went the scary wings of Chewee the Chickadee, and even Chaik the Bluejay, who isn’t afraid of many things, went off with a startled “squawk,” while Nibble Rabbit dashed through a tunnel he knew in the Quail’s Thicket. But you know Nibble. First he’s scared—and then he’s curious. As soon as he was safely hidden he stopped to listen. “Stupid beast,” he said to himself. “Why couldn’t she have waited until we got done talking?”

“M-m-moo!” lowed the Red Cow in a troubled voice.

Nibble came creeping back again. Pretty soon he sat up and stretched his neck to get a good look at her. “What are you doing here?” he demanded. “Is anything the matter?”

“M-m-m-yes,” moaned the Red Cow, swinging her head restlessly from side

to side and looking terribly troubled. "I don't know just what it is, but I'm all afraid! Isn't there any place where wolves don't come? Or Men?"

"No Man comes here," said Nibble, " 'cepting only Tommy Peele—and he's just a little one." Then, because the Red Cow looked so unhappy, he burst out cheerfully, "Come on. I'll show you where you can hide, even from him."

But she looked at him very doubtfully with her near-sighted eyes. "M-m-no-no," she hesitated. "You haven't forgotten that I tried to kill you when you hung that flapping thing on my horn." She meant the door of his cage that she jerked off to get at the carrot Tommy Peele had given Nibble for breakfast. But she insisted on thinking that he had fastened the door to her. She was a very stupid thing.

"That's all right," he explained.

“You let me out of the cage, so we’re all fair and square.”

By this time she was so puzzled she couldn’t remember anything. But she could tell that Nibble wasn’t angry, so she followed him. And he showed her a fine dry spot on the top of a little hillock, all shut in by clustering thorns. For Nibble wouldn’t trust anything but the Pickery Things for even a cow to hide in.

There she stayed and there she slept very comfortably. Even the cold wind that came up with the sunset couldn’t reach her. And Nibble dug down a little way into the mud and ate the top off a mallow root and a couple of plantains for his supper. And then he had to lick himself very dry and clean before he popped into his own comfortable hole.

He slept late next morning because he’d stayed awake puzzling over that

Red Cow's doings the night before. But as soon as he had washed his face he set out to find her, for he'd thought of a lot more questions to ask. And there she was, crouched down close in her hiding-place, with her eyes bigger and starier than ever. "Hssh!" she snorted through her wide, windy nostrils. "There was a Man! But he didn't see me at all!"

CHAPTER II

WHY TOMMY 'MOST LOST HIS TEMPER

NONSENSE!" said Nibble Rabbit. "There wasn't any Man. They don't come here. You must have had a bad dream."

"No, I didn't," she insisted. "I was wide awake and I saw him as plain as plain."

Nibble sniffed the air, but the wind had blown all the scent away, so he didn't believe her. When he turned to her again she was trying to eat the twigs that she could reach with her long tongue. "Hey! Don't you know better than that?" he demanded. "You'll get pickers in your mouth, and, what's much worse, you'll feel awfully queer and sick inside of you. Doctor Musk-

rat says you should only eat that tree for medicine.”

Nibble felt very wise and grown-up beside this foolish cow. She wasn't really wild and she wasn't really tame. Poor beast! No wonder she was scary. She didn't know enough to be either thing properly. “Come along!” he ordered. “I'll take you down for a drink and then you can eat the willows. If you're like the partridge you can nip the tips off a cottonwood that your long neck will reach up to.”

So the Red Cow hove herself up to her feet, tail first, as is the custom of cows, and followed him obediently. And he showed her the way to the warm spring that was Doctor Muskrat's front door.

It was a good thing he was polite and let her drink first. For as soon as she began dragging her clumsy toes in the muck to spread them far enough apart

so she could get her nose into the water —“Clang!” went the cold steely jaws of another trap.

She jumped back, snorting and waving her tassely tail, while she cocked her eyes to try and see it. But Nibble wasn't paying any attention to her. He was thumping and bumping as hard as ever he could with his soft furry feet and calling “Doctor Muskrat! Doctor Muskrat! Doctor Muskrat!”

“Eh?” said the old doctor as his nose came up out of the water (and the cow snorted at him harder than ever), “what's all this?” He sniffed at her inquiringly.

“Oh, Doctor Muskrat,” Nibble almost cried. “Look! It's more jaws!”

“Ah!” The old beast examined them wisely and shook his head. “What did I tell you? You can't trust even Tommy Peele! He was just pretending to make friends with us so we'd

forget to be afraid and he could catch us again!"

"I guess you're right," murmured Nibble. But he felt very badly about it—for he really liked Tommy.

Just then the Red Cow spoke up. She didn't understand Doctor Muskrat, but she caught Tommy's name. And although she didn't like Tommy herself, even a stupid cow knows enough to be honest. "I told you I saw that Man," she said to Nibble. "Well, it surely wasn't Tommy!"

"It wasn't, eh?" snapped Doctor Muskrat. "We'll just see about that." He dove again. He came up looking very puzzled. "Tommy's jaws are still biting the mud, just where he threw them," he reported. "We'll watch what he does when he finds these."

It was Saturday, so as soon as Tommy had finished his chores up at the barn, he whistled to his old dog, Watch, and

came tramping down the fields with his tall rubber boots. He had a cap full of meal and an ear of corn in his pocket. Yes! And he had a nice lump of fat for Chewee the Chickadee and a string to tie it to a branch with.

But Nibble didn't come running to meet him. He was crouching back in the reeds with Doctor Muskrat. And the Red Cow had lumbered off to her own hiding-place in the thicket that Nibble had showed her.

"Come, Bunny, Bunny," called Tommy, in his nice voice that fairly made Nibble's feet itch to run to him. He crept up softly near the warm spring so as not to scare his muskrat. Then he saw the footprints—the big ones of the Red Cow, and the little ones of Nibble Rabbit, and the paws of Doctor Muskrat with his toe gone, for now it was healed so he could step on it. And there was the trap, sticking right

straight up where the cow's clumsy foot had jerked it.

And wasn't he angry! Just wasn't he? He was the crossdest little boy in all the woods and fields, and the houses, too. Because someone was trying to catch his very own wild things that he was trying to make friends with!

The trap was chained to a bulrush stalk and he yanked it right off, stalk and all, he was so angry. And then he did something that showed he was really learning to think quite like a wild thing. It was just what wise old Doctor Muskrat would have done if he hadn't been so troubled, deep down inside, that he forgot about everything but Tommy. He trailed the footsteps of that other man and he found two other traps. Right in his own woods!

"Clang! clang!" He had given each of those cold steel jaws a stick to bite on. Then he rooted up their chains

and tied them all together. "Crash!" They went plump down into the mud beside his own. "Yah! Yah! Hooray!" barked Watch. He thought that anything Tommy did was perfect. And he wagged his big wavy tail so very hard that at last his tail wagged him and he waltzed around and around.

And then Nibble came bouncing up with his ears in the air, and Doctor Muskrat waddled after him. But Doctor Muskrat stopped at the edge of the reeds because, you know, he and Watch hadn't made friends. Still, he looked very kindly at Tommy and he came out in a great hurry to get his meal when Tommy moved away.

But Watch nearly scared him when he turned around to ask: "Nibble, do you know where I'll find that Red Cow?"



Tommy finds a trap.

CHAPTER III

THE RED COW'S SECRET

NIBBLE RABBIT was so surprised at Watch's question that he stopped eating. And he was eating the delicious meal that Tommy had brought, so it was a big surprise. For that was just the question he didn't know how to answer. He'd hidden the Red Cow himself. She was trusting him. How could he show where she was when she was specially hiding from Tommy?

"I know," said Nibble, at last, "but it isn't fair to tell. Why do you want her?"

"Why, I want her because we keep our cows in the barn, not in the wet woods like you silly Wild Things,"

Watch answered, smiling. "It doesn't matter, anyway. Do you think I can't go sniffing around and find her for myself if you won't tell?" And he ran out a sly, pink tongue.

"Well, she's all wild and scary, 'specially of Men," pleaded Nibble. "You remember how she chased Tommy before. You'd better take him to the barn first and come back after her alone." Nibble still had an idea that Watch herded Tommy Peele the way he did the cows.

"That's perfectly true, Bunny," said Watch. And he went bounding off ahead of his Boy, urging him to hurry as though he had something particularly interesting to show him. And he had, but he didn't know it.

As soon as they had finished the meal Tommy had brought them, Doctor Muskrat went off to sleep on his sun-warmed stone, spread out flat with his

paws hanging over the edges, and Nibble went lipity, lipity up his tunnel in the thicket to tell the Red Cow Watch was asking for her.

He heard the strangest noises as he came along—but they weren't sad and scary. She was talking to someone in a new voice, very soft and gentle, very loving and happy.

“Who's there?” Nibble called. “Red Cow, can I come?”

“Come quick, quick!” she lowed. “Isn't it lovely? That's why I was afraid. I came here to hide so that no one could take it away from me.” Then she added in her new voice that wasn't meant for Nibble at all, “Lie still, wee thing.”

Nibble poked his head through the Pickery Things and peeked at her. And he saw what she was talking about. It was the cunningest little red calf with a white spot in the middle of its

forehead. It had bright black eyes, wide open, and it perked a pair of wide, round ears at Nibble. Then it tried to get up on its spindly legs, but they were pretty shaky.

“Does it seem all right?” asked the Red Cow. It was her first calf and she wasn’t quite sure what to do with it.

“It seems very queer,” said Nibble honestly. Of course it did to him. Because baby rabbits are blind and haven’t any fur. “Can’t I call Doctor Muskrat?” He was wondering, too, whether he oughtn’t to call Watch and Tommy.

“Yes, go call the doctor,” said the Red Cow.

You just ought to have seen Doctor Muskrat wake up when he heard Nibble squeal for him so excitedly. “I’m coming! I’m coming!” he called in his high, thin voice, and he flopped along through Nibble’s tunnel as fast as ever

he could, for his webby paws aren't meant for running.

"What is it?" he asked. And then he saw the little calf. And it sniffed its turned-up nose at him with a cunning pink tongue-tip showing. He walked all around it, inspecting it very carefully. It seemed strange to him, too, because baby muskrats are born as blind and helpless as baby rabbits.

"Is there anything the matter with it?" asked the Red Cow, anxiously.

"I think not," he said, sensibly, "excepting that it's pretty cold and shivery. You must lick it hard and get its blood to circulating."

So she licked it and licked it. And her tongue was very strong and very gentle, because that's one of the things all cows' tongues are made for. And the baby calf grew livelier and livelier. And pretty soon it got up on its spindly legs, waving its little tail that was still

too new to have a tassel on it. "Now what'll I do?" asked the Red Cow.

"Feed it," advised Doctor Muskrat.

So she did, though it took quite a little coaxing to show the silly baby how to find what he wanted. But the milk was trickling from the corners of his little mouth in about three minutes. And then wasn't he happy?

"Let me say, madam," began Doctor Muskrat, in his most professional tone, "that is the most remarkable youngster I have ever attended." You see he was only used to bunnies and muskrats and fieldmice.

But the Red Cow heaved a great sigh of pride when she heard that. And just wasn't she the happiest cow in the world?

"Nevertheless," went on the doctor, "this is no place for it. You should have a nice quiet hole for it. There's nothing in the woods big enough for

you. I believe the barn is where you ought to be."

"But they'll take it away from me?" moaned the Red Cow, getting all scary again.

"Not if you trust Tommy," put in Nibble Rabbit, eagerly.

"Madam, if you'll take an old muskrat's advice," said the doctor, "you will place your confidence in Tommy Peele." He used those long words because they sounded wise and important. And the Red Cow was really impressed.

"All right," she agreed. And on the word Nibble Rabbit darted out across the Broad Field and down the Pasture, where he could see Watch and Tommy Peele.

CHAPTER IV

WHY LOUIE THOMSON DIDN'T ENJOY HIS VISIT

WATCH, come back!" Nibble squealed breathlessly, when he caught up with Tommy and the old dog in the end of the Pasture. "Come back and bring Tommy, too. I can tell you the Red Cow's secret. She has a little new baby calf and she says she'll trust it to Tommy Peele."

"Er-r yah!" barked Watch, very pleased and proud because the other animals were beginning to love his Tommy. And he turned right around to follow Nibble.

But of course Tommy hadn't heard a word they said. They talk too low, for one thing, and they use all sorts of



Nibble and Muskrat visit the Red Cow.

sign languages, too, for another. He thought Watch was chasing Nibble. So he shouted and scolded and called him a bad old dog. But Watch only wagged his tail and kept right on.

Meantime, something had been happening back at the pond. The strange Man who set all those strange traps had come to look at them. And the Red Cow heard him. But she wasn't scary any more because she had her new calf and she meant to take care of him. And she didn't mean to let any one else in the world but Tommy Peele lay a hand on him.

He had a nice meal of warm milk inside of him and he'd gone to sleep. Besides, Doctor Muskrat was still there to look after him. So out of the thicket she bounced and after the Man.

"M-m-moo!" she roared, just like the first cows did when they told Mother Nature they'd punish the wicked wolves

for themselves if she gave them their teeth again. But you remember Mother Nature couldn't do that, so she gave them horns longer and sharper than the teeth of any wolf. The Red Cow's horns certainly were. So that strange Man climbed up the nearest tree to get away from them.

"Get out!" she snorted. "Go away from here!" But of course he couldn't because she was walking around and around the trunk of that big tree, roaring at him and sending the mud over her shoulders with her big, horny toes. Only she never thought of that, because she was rather stupid. Then Watch came bouncing up and he barked and snapped very fiercely. But Tommy just laughed.

"Oh, Louie Thomson," he jeered. "You will set your traps in my woods, will you? See what you get now!" For this was the greedy boy who had

sold him the trap that wouldn't work.

"You'll see what you get if that crazy cow takes after you!" yelled Louie.

Tommy was just a little bit afraid, for the cow was watching him with that scary look in her eyes. But he wasn't going to let Louie Thomson know it. So he stood perfectly still and called her, "Come Bossy, Co' Boss."

"Go along, Red Cow!" barked Watch.

"I know," squealed Nibble, "I can see Chaik Jay's present sticking right out of Tommy's pocket. Ask him for that ear of corn."

Now the Red Cow was really very hungry. She reached out her sniffing nose. Tommy didn't move. So she picked the corn right out of his pocket with her long curling tongue. And then he laid such a gentle hand on her that she knew she wouldn't be afraid of him ever again.

So here was Tommy Peele stroking the Red Cow's neck while she ate the corn he had meant to give Chaik Jay. Here, too, was Nibble Rabbit enjoying the haws off a wild rose bush the Red Cow had trampled down, while old Doctor Muskrat watched the Red Cow's sleepy new baby, and pricked his ears to hear all that was going on.

Even Watch the Dog was happy. He was lying at the foot of the tree, with his nose on his paws as though he expected to stay there all day, and wagging his tail.

But Louie Thomson, perched on one of its branches in the cold wind, was very unhappy. Whenever he moved Watch would raise the hair all along his back and growl, and the Red Cow would roll her scary eyes at him. "Hey, Tommy!" he called. "Drive off those brutes and let me come down!"

"No, I won't," said Tommy. "This

is two times you've cheated me. You cheated me with that old trap, and now you tried to come over here into my very own woods and catch my very own Beasts. That's stealing. I'm going to let them watch you while I go up to the house and get my father to come for you."

Of course not one of the Woodsfolk knew what he meant. But they knew he was very angry.

"Oh, please, please don't do that!" begged Louie. "I'll promise never to set foot in your woods again. Honest, cross my heart and hope to die, I will! Please let me go this time."

Nibble sat straight up and listened hard. For Louie sounded just like Chatter Squirrel the night of the Terrible Storm when he was so terribly afraid. "My whiskers, but isn't Tommy wonderful," he breathed to Watch. "You and the Red Cow can

scare that Man when you can reach him, but Tommy scares him without doing anything." And he came close up to Tommy's tall rubber boots and cocked his head on one side, trying to see how Tommy did it.

"I know you'll promise," Tommy was saying, "and you'll keep it, too, or else I'll know about it." He just meant he and Watch would find Louie's footprints.

But Louie saw that rabbit sitting by Tommy and looking exactly as though he were talking to him.

"And if you want your traps," Tommy went on, "you'll have to get that muskrat to find them." He just meant he'd thrown them into the pond.

But Louie Thomson didn't know what to think of that. He guessed perhaps he'd better leave Tommy Peele and his wild things very much alone.

CHAPTER V

NIBBLE TELLS ONE SECRET AND HEARS ANOTHER

NOW when Tommy Peele followed Watch back to the woods it was because he thought the old dog was chasing Nibble Rabbit. Then he made up his mind Nibble had warned Watch about that bad Louie Thomson. He never dreamed Nibble had whispered a secret that belonged to the Red Cow. So as soon as he'd made Louie promise to behave, he whistled to Watch and began to lead the Red Cow away so Louie could climb down.

Well, right then the Red Cow remembered that secret she had to show him. So she insisted on leading him.

She fairly galloped around the end of the thicket, with Tommy running after her in his tall rubber boots and Watch bounding after him. But Nibble took a short cut through his tunnel. And he met Doctor Muskrat coming to meet him.

“Climp, clump, climp, clump!” went a sound outside.

“What’s that?” asked Doctor Muskrat.

Nibble peered along the ground. And he could see Louie Thomson’s boots moving very fast. “It’s that Man,” he exclaimed. “He’s running like Silvertip the Fox did when the Red Cow took after him.”

“Fine!” chuckled Doctor Muskrat. “He’ll never bring his wicked jaws back here again. And we can thank Tommy Peele for that.”

Then there was another sound. “What’s that?” asked Nibble. And



The Red Cow walked around and around the trunk of that big tree roaring at him.

Doctor Muskrat laughed. For it was Tommy Peele squealing with surprise because he'd found the secret that belonged to the Red Cow. "A calf! Oh, the cute little thing!"

So Nibble and Doctor Muskrat both crept back down the tunnel to watch what was going on. The calf raised his head and looked at Tommy; then he got up on his shaky legs and sniffed at him. Because Tommy was a strange Beast with a strange smell and even a baby knows enough to be careful about strange things. But when he touched his little turned-up nose to the hand Tommy held out to him he smelled his mother. You know Tommy had been stroking her. So the foolish little rascal put out his little pink tongue, trying to lick Tommy's fingers. And wasn't his mother pleased because they were friends the very first thing!

Watch led the way, and Tommy

walked beside the Red Cow and helped to steer her wobbly-legged calf all the way up to the barn. And the baby kept trying to kick up his silly little heels the way Nibble used to when he felt playful. And he just would run splash into all the puddles, and bunt and wriggle when they caught him. The Red Cow kept getting prouder and prouder every step, but even she was glad when they got safely home with him.

Nibble went with them as far as the Pasture. Doctor Muskrat was enjoying a nice sweet flag-root (the first one he'd dug that spring) when Nibble came loping back again. And he was the messiest rabbit you ever heard of. And so cross and disgusted!

"That bad baby!" he complained, beginning to clean the mud spots off his white shirt front. "He wouldn't do anything I told him to. And then, the

very first time I wasn't looking, he danced in a puddle and splashed it all over me. From whiskers to—" he craned his neck about to look—"to tail! He all but drowned me!"

"You don't have to tell me that," said Doctor Muskrat, and his fat sides were shaking with laughter. "I've eyes to see with. You're as wet as ever you were when I fished you out of that pond there." For you remember how Nibble tumbled right into the water he was so frightened the first time he ever saw the kind old muskrat.

"And then," Nibble went on indignantly, "the impudent little scamp sniffed his little turned-up nose at me because I was spluttering."

"You can't expect a calf to be born with manners, can you?" soothed Doctor Muskrat, "'specially if it belongs to the Red Cow. But, as I told her, that's the most remarkable youngst—" He

flattened his ears, ready to dive, for a shadow came swooping down and he was expecting the Marsh Hawk back any day.

But it was only Chaik the Jay. "Hello," he piped. "Who was she and what did you tell her?" And he pounced on an acorn that was half-buried in the ground.

"The Red Cow," answered Doctor Muskrat, "has a little new calf who's the most remarkable youngster I've ever seen." And he was going to tell Chaik all about it, only——

Didn't Nibble Rabbit just interrupt and tell it all himself? Just didn't he? He was that puffed up because he was the first one to see it that he couldn't wait. He described how bright its little eyes were, and how it wriggled its tail like Chatter Squirrel does when he's in a temper, and—everything there was to tell about that Red Cow's red

baby with the white star in his forehead and the turned-up nose.

And all the time Nibble was forgetting to clean his fur. And the mud spots showed worse than ever as the wind dried them. But Nibble was too busy talking about that very same bad little Beast who had splashed them on him.

Chaik was preening and tucking in his feathers every once in a while. He didn't have his new spring coat yet, so he was very particular over his old one. Presently he noticed Nibble. "By the Worm in the Acorn, Rabbit, what's happened to you?" he wanted to know.

Do you think Nibble would tell on that Red Cow's bad baby? Not at all. He just said, "Oh, I wasn't looking—you don't know what the walking is this spring." Then he got very busy with his mud spots and Chaik flew away.

“Hm,” giggled the doctor. “What do you really think of the Red Cow’s calf, what you told me about it or what you told Chaik?”

“I mean,” said Nibble shamefacedly, “that I’m going up to see it to-morrow morning.” And off he hopped to his bed.

He woke up early, early, before the darkest night had begun to melt into the gray of dawn. He yawned sleepily and rolled over. My, but that hole of his was warm and comfortable! Suddenly he jumped up and began to scrub his face with his paws.

In about three minutes he was down by the pond, thumping for Doctor Muskrat. And weren’t the doctor’s eyes all sleepy when he poked his head out of the water? “Ouf,” he shivered, “what do you want at this hour of the night? Spear me with an icicle, but

this pond is cold!” (If one of the Woodsfolk is found frozen to death the saying is that he’s been speared by an icicle.)

“Come along,” said Nibble. “I’m going up to the barn to see the Red Cow and her bad baby.”

“What do you take me for?” snorted the old doctor. “Don’t you forget that Silvertip the Fox is living there! Gimlet the Woodpecker said so. I can’t run like you can and there isn’t any water for me to dive into.”

“I forgot,” apologized Nibble.

“Well, you just be careful,” warned the wise old beast, “and you come straight back and tell me about him.”

So off went Nibble, creeping about among the puddles. He dove into the Brushpile for a minute because he heard two birds talking. But they were only little downy Mr. and Mrs. Screech Owl, smaller than Bobby

Robin. "I tell you it's too early for nesting," one was saying.

"Not if Silvertip keeps on leaving all that nice food for us in the fence corner," insisted the other. "He scarcely eats half of what he catches, and chickens are the best eating in the world for our owlets. We wouldn't have to do any hunting."

"So," said Nibble to himself, "Gimlet was right. Silvertip's catching Tommy Peele's chickens."

He sniffed carefully about the haystack and, sure enough, there was a nice nest that smelled of Silvertip—it's almost the same smell as the seeds of the "cranes-bill," as the Woodsfolk call wild geranium. It was empty, so Nibble cocked an ear at the chicken coop. Sure enough, there was a tiny rustling in the straw. As he sat there listening he heard the scared shout of a pullet, "Squa-awk!" Squa-a—" and that



Silvertip trotted past with the poor chicken
hanging from his jaws.

was all. Silvertip had throttled her. Bounce! Down he came from the perch and slam! Out he slipped through the little back door his snoopy nose had learned how to open. But Nibble didn't dare call Watch for fear Silvertip would hear him.

CHAPTER VI

A GAME OF TAG IN TOMMY'S BARN

YOU know about Nibble Rabbit. First he's scared and then he's curious. He was scared when he heard Silvertip catch the pullet. And he was still more scared when Silvertip trotted past in the mist, splashing softly in the puddles, with the poor chicken hanging from his jaws. But when Silvertip suddenly stopped and sniffed Nibble's own footprints by the haystack, he was the scarest little rabbit in all the fields and woods and the barnyard, too.

Just the same he could see Silvertip say to himself, "It's too wet to follow that trail. I'll keep an eye out for bunnies around here as well as birds."

And Nibble said to his own self, "Bunny, that fox will have to do some looking." Then Silvertip picked up the chicken and trotted on.

Of course Nibble took a long breath when he had gone. That gave him time to grow curious. "I wonder which fence-corner those greedy little Screech Owls said he hid his food in?" he thought. "Watch would like to know." So he peeked around the end of the stack and listened. Silvertip was away out of sight in the mist, but his feet went splashing off to the very corner of the Broad Field, where he used to sleep under some elderberry bushes. Yes, and sometimes he'd catch the birds who came there for berries. Oh, that Silvertip was certainly clever.

"Now," Nibble thought, "it's safe for me to hunt for the Red Cow." She wasn't in the milking barn, but he could hear her baby, not very far away,

calling his mother to get up and give him his breakfast. And the more he listened to that naughty little calf the more he wanted to see it again. So he crept down the line of scary, switchy tails, past the very last one. Then he came to a narrow lane, all sprinkled with dried clover-leaves. Pretty soon he had to squeeze under a door into another part of the barn. It was much brighter than the milking barn, because there was a hole in the wall at the far end. There were three box stalls, and he could hear the little calf in the last one.

He hopped up on a bale of straw and ran along the top of the partition until he could look in and see him. There that naughty little beast had got tired of calling his mother and bunting her, so now he was trying to kick her. And Nibble thought he was cunninger than ever.

Of course the Red Cow was pleased to see him, and full of talk. But Nibble was getting curious again. After a while he said, "Red Cow, I can see the trees moving outside, but there isn't any wind in here. Why is that?"

"Why, I never thought about it," said the Red Cow. You remember she was always a little bit stupid.

"I'm going to find out," said Nibble. He hopped carefully along the partition to the window. And if ever a rabbit looked foolish, it was Nibble when he snubbed his twitchy nose against it. He was puzzled. None of the Woods-folk could imagine such a thing as window glass.

"What is it?" asked the Red Cow, wagging her big ears.

"Ice," guessed Nibble. "No, it's not, either." He was trying to taste it with his licky little tongue that he uses to wash his shirt front. "It doesn't taste

like the drops that freeze into my fur and it isn't wet. But it's cold——”

And right then he learned some more about it. For you know Silvertip had seen the bunny's footprints. “Chickens are all right,” thought the bad fox to himself as he trotted along, “but I'd a great deal rather have a nice tasty mouthful of rabbit.” So he hid the pullet and came galloping back to find Nibble.

It wasn't long before he saw the bunny's trail going into the door of the milking barn, and he could smell plainly on the dry wood floor exactly where Nibble had gone. So Silvertip went sniffing quietly down the long aisle behind the row of cows. But they smelled him. “Help! Watch! Wolves! Wolves! Help!” they bawled. And they all tried to kick him.

Now Silvertip was afraid to run out past their heels, so he had to follow Nib-

ble's trail under the door into the barn, where the box stalls were. And there he saw Nibble, perched on top of the partition, sniffing at the window with his back turned.

Up jumped Silvertip on to the straw bale. Down jumped Nibble into the stall beside the Red Cow. "Arh," whimpered Silvertip excitedly, and jumped after him.

You never heard such a commotion. For the Red Cow began to roar and aim her horns at the fox. And Silvertip had to do some lively dodging. He'd just managed to scramble back on the partition when Watch came squeezing under the door. There wasn't another place for the fox to turn so he ran straight for the window.

"Wouw!" he whimpered as he hit it. But it was too late to stop. "Crash!" he went right through it and landed plump on the floor of a wagon that stood

beneath it. Then he went galloping off to the woods as fast as he could go, holding up first one foot and then the other, for he couldn't make up his mind where he was hurt the most. And his nose felt as if a bee had lit on it, and his eyes were so bunged up he could hardly see where he was going, and he had a new slit in the ear Mrs. Hooter had nipped—he was pretty badly damaged. And he was grinding his teeth and blaming poor Nibble Rabbit for every bit of it. For no one who thinks himself as clever as Silvertip can get into trouble without finding some way to think somebody else made him do it.

“Aourgh!” barked Watch excitedly. And then of course Nibble knew he was perfectly safe, and he wanted to come out from under the Red Cow's manger, where he had hidden, to see what was happening. But the naughty little calf was so excited he was dancing around



There was Nibble, perched on top of the
partition.

and bunting at everything in sight. His mother had to give him some more breakfast before he'd stand still a single minute.

By that time Silvertip was away off down the Pasture and Watch had squeezed under the door again. He was bound to catch that fox, but he knew more than to go jumping through windows after him.

So Nibble just hopped up on the manger and from there onto the high partition and stretched out his inquisitive nose where the glass had been. There wasn't much left for him to snub it against, I can tell you. And the wind blew through it so hard that it laid his ears flat back.

"What is it?" demanded the Red Cow. She was learning to be curious, too, and that's the first step to being wise and sensible.

"It's awfully hard," Nibble an-

swered. "I can bite ice, but I can't bite this."

Just then who should open the door but Tommy Peele with the Red Cow's breakfast.

Right away, he saw the glass was broken. But he wasn't angry at all. He just said, "Did you do that?" But he picked up every bit that had fallen inside so folks wouldn't cut their feet on it, and then he went around to pick up what was outside, too. And he found some blood and a big tuft of Silvertip's hair on the wagon-box.

"Phew!" he whistled. "Bunny, this fur isn't any of yours—nor that footprint, either! You just wait until school is out and Watch and I'll just see about this!"

He hadn't any time to do it then. For he had to stuff the Red Cow's manger full of hay and hurry fast to get to the schoolhouse before the bell rang.

“Have some, Nibble,” she lowed politely. And the bunny didn’t need a second invitation. His twitchy nose had been wiggling pretty fast from the first minute he smelled that delicious clover.

CHAPTER VII

THE WHITE COW BEGINS A STORY

IF THE smell of that delicious hay in the Red Cow's manger made Nibble's nose go fast, the taste of it made his hungry little jaws go still faster. And the Red Cow was just about as busy as he was. Her big teeth wouldn't move quite so quickly, but she could take bigger bites to make up for lost time.

They were still eating when he heard a loud snort just outside. So he jumped up on the windowsill again to be sure who it was. "Hello, Rabbit," came the White Cow's nice fluty voice as she saw his whiskers in the window. "I told you you'd come back again."

"Oh, the Red Cow's got such a cun-

ning calf in here I just have to come," he laughed.

"She has, has she?" mooed the White Cow. "I'd like to see it myself." She was a motherly old beast, so she really did love babies. "Is it all right? That wolf who ran through the milking barns has been around here—I can smell him. Calves are what they always come for."

"That was only Silvertip the Fox," he chuckled. "He's gone!"

Still the White Cow kept shaking her head and snorting. "He's no business here. He's a wolf, and it's plain against the compact."

"What compact, please, Madame Snowflake?" lowed the Red Cow.

"Why, the compact between Cows and Man," she answered. "You know Man used to hunt us. It must have been dreadful, for one man is worse than a whole pack of wolves——"

“Exactly what Doctor Muskrat says!” exclaimed Nibble.

“Well, it’s true,” she asserted. “Cows are all right so long as they keep all together. But you can’t have little new wobbly babies in a herd because we’re so near-sighted someone would be sure to step on them. So the mothers used to go off and hide them until they grew strong enough not to let themselves get stepped on. And the wolves and the men would watch out for them. No matter how careful the cows were someone would be sure to find them. Long before they came, the mothers would get all scary and unhappy just thinking about it.”

“I felt just that way!” gasped the Red Cow. “Didn’t I, Nibble?”

“Well, after a long time Man made a compact with the cows. He promised that if they’d live with him and give him milk and plough his fields and let

him take the meat of certain ones, not the young heifers or the mothers, he'd keep the wolves away from them."

"How did that happen?" asked Nibble excitedly, for he guessed it was one of those tales of the First-Off Beginning of Things.

And sure enough, the White Cow began, "Well, as I said, both Man and wolves hunted the cows in the First-Off Beginning. That was bad enough. But when Man made friends with the dogs, who were really wolves, it was worse yet. They both knew all the tricks between them.

"There was a river wandering through the plain where the cows used to feed, and it had a rocky island standing up in the middle of it. The island was hollow as a cup and full of brush and grass, and there was only one crack in the rocks where a cow could just squeeze through to get into it. It was

a secret among the cows, who only went there to raise their calves, and they were careful to walk a long way in the water to hide their trails before they crossed over to it. So the wolves would never have found it. But a man did.

“He was hunting cows. So were a pack of wolves, and they saw he had only one dog, so they decided to hunt him instead. They say a man is very good eating. So he ran for the island. Because he knew if he could climb high up on the tall rocks they couldn’t climb up after him. He had to take his dog by the scruff of the neck to help him. And of course when he got up high he could see everything—the two cows who were grazing in the middle of the island and the narrow passage between the rocks, and the wolves running around and around looking for a place where they could get in.

“The cows couldn’t see the wolves,

but they could hear them. So one of them, who was an old cow and very wise, galloped over to the passage. And when the wolves got there she was stopping the way with her sharp horns.

“I don’t know how long she could have stayed there, for there were a great many wolves and only one cow, but the man was wiser yet. He saw a big tippy boulder that he could roll down to block the passage so nobody could possibly get in. And he gave it a big shove. Smash, it went down right in the middle of the wolves! It killed the leader and another wolf, and the rest got scared and ran away.

“So did the cow, for the man’s dog started right after her. But the man called him back. ‘Come here!’ he called. ‘Stop that, you foolish thing. The wolves would have picked our bones if she hadn’t helped us. That’s one cow you can never kill.’

“The dog came back with his tail between his legs, grumbling to himself. ‘This is very queer. It’s the first time in all my life I was told not to kill anything.’ And of course the cow heard him. And it set her thinking.”

CHAPTER VIII

HOW THE MAN'S WIFE MADE THE COMPACT WITH THE COWS

THE White Cow stopped talking quite as though she had finished her story. But Nibble Rabbit and the Red Cow, who were listening with all their ears, both broke out: "Please, Mrs. Snowflake, you haven't said a word yet about the compact!"

"Pickery thistles!" she exclaimed. "So I haven't. I was just thinking about it instead. Well, the man was in the middle of that little hollow island with the high rocks all around it, and so were the cows. The dog was growling because he couldn't kill the cow, and the cow was wondering why the man wouldn't let him. But most of all she

was wondering how quickly she and her calf would starve because that stone blocked up the passage.

“The man was thinking about that, too. For the cow had saved his life by keeping out the wolves; that made him in debt to her. And if a man was careless about his debts he was sure to be dreadfully unlucky. Either he had to roll away that stone so the cow could go over to the plains to graze—and he knew he couldn’t do that—or he had to bring the grass to her.

“Bright and early next morning he went to bring the grass to feed that cow. He found it was lots of trouble, especially since he didn’t have his wife there to help him. So he decided to bring her.

“He told her how nice and safe it was in the middle of that rocky island until she got quite delighted at the idea of living there. So she packed their be-

longings on her back, slung their baby in front of her, and started out. She waded the stream all right, but she stopped at the big rock which blocked up the passage.

“ ‘I won’t stay here at all unless you take that out of there,’ she said. ‘It’s too inconvenient.’ ”

“So of course he just had to. And when it comes right down to ‘having to’ a man can do almost anything. But he had a terrible time. He heaved and clawed and shoved and rolled until his fingers and arms were sore. Then he picked up a stick, because it was easier to handle—and he learned how to pry that stone out of the passage.

“In walked his wife and began to settle their new home. Out walked the cows, and over they went to the plain to pick their own grass, but they left their calves hidden on the island. So,

after they had finished feeding, back they came.

“Then the man took his stick and pried the rock into the passage again for fear the wolves would come back. And his wife stared at the cows and the cows stared at his wife, but still they didn’t make any compact.”

Nibble Rabbit and the Red Cow were both fairly stamping their feet with impatience because the White Cow wouldn’t hurry right along with her story. But she brought a big wad of cud all the way up her long neck and stood there chewing it while she thought things over. Finally she swallowed it and went on.

“I told you the man learned to use the great stone for a gate to the narrow passageway where the cows squeezed through. But I didn’t tell you how angry the wolves were about that.

“They were simply raging. Night

after night they gnashed their jaws and howled around those rocks, but their claws wouldn't climb them. And the man's dog would sit up on top and shout insults at them. And the two cows would snuggle together in the brush with their calves between them and say, 'Those wolves would have eaten us long ago if the man hadn't been here.'

"They got very used to the man and his family. They didn't walk 'way round his fire any more, or make eyes at his wife, and the calves got very friendly with his baby. But his wife used to look hard at them. 'It's all very well to take care of the cow who saved your life,' she'd say to the man, 'but how about that other one?'

" 'Well, what about her?' he'd answer. 'She isn't any trouble.'

" 'She ought to pay for being taken care of,' insisted his wife. 'It's all

very well for this year, but next year these calves will be grown up and there will be new ones and we'll be all cluttered up with cattle.'

"She thought and thought. At last she caught up her biggest clamshell and walked down into the thicket where the cows stood. And the dog went with her. 'Old Cow,' she said, 'you can live with us for ever and ever because you stopped the passageway with your horns when the wolves were trying to get in to kill my husband. Young Cow, you will have to pay something if you're going to live with us.' And with that she tried to milk the young cow into her clamshell.

"The young cow didn't like it a little bit. But she was afraid of the dog, and besides the old cow argued, 'You have milk to spare, and you'll never have any place as safe as this. Let me talk to her.'

“So the young cow gave in and let herself be milked. But the old one said to the woman: ‘We’ll stay with you and give you milk so long as you see we get food and water and protect us from the wolves. But the minute you don’t we’ll go off and be wild again, and you’ll be no better off than you were before.’”

“‘Agreed,’ said the woman. ‘The dog will be our witness.’”

“So that was the beginning of the compact. The cows settled down to live with the man and his family. But after the woman was gone the wise old cow said comfortably, ‘It’s spring now. She doesn’t think how much trouble it will be to feed us through the winter.’”

“Wasn’t that old cow clever!” exclaimed Nibble admiringly.

The White Cow snorted. “She was wise. But that woman was wiser. She knew that if she waited long

enough there would be cattle on that island who hadn't any milk, so she and the man could bargain some more with them. They had to carry loads and pull ploughs; they even had to let the man kill certain ones. They didn't like that a little bit, but the wise old cow argued, 'It's better than being hunted by both wolves and men.' So they finally gave in. It was really a good bargain for us," finished the White Cow thoughtfully, "but it was a better one for the man. After he learned to build barns as safe as that island he gave up hunting."

CHAPTER IX

HOW A BUNNY UNDERTOOK TO HUNT A FOX

MADAME SNOWFLAKE swished her tail thoughtfully for a moment; then she went back to chewing her cud as a sign that her story was all done.

“My horns!” exclaimed the Red Cow.

“That’s awfully interesting.”

“Yes,” drawled the story-teller.

“But can’t you see how worrisome it is? If Tommy Peele lets wolves go galloping through this barn we’ll have to go wild again. It’s in the compact. That’s what I’ve been trying to explain.”

“Noo-oo-oo,” the Red Cow moaned.

“I don’t want to go wild. I won’t go wild again. I’ve been wild once, and

I like being Tommy Peele's tame cow ever so much better."

"Nonsense!" interrupted Nibble Rabbit, sitting up very straight. "It hasn't anything at all to do with you cows. Silvertip's no more of a wolf than Watch is. Besides, I'm the only one he was chasing. He won't come back again unless I do, and I won't come until there isn't any Silvertip to chase me."

"Hoo-oo," teased the White Cow. "What can you do to Silvertip?"

"Wait and see," said Nibble. And off he set. But as he ran he said to himself, "Silvertip's very big and clever—whatever can I do to him?"

For a while he was just about the most thoughtful bunny that ever flopped an ear. He'd made the White Cow a great big promise, one no grown-up rabbit would ever have thought of.

And he had to have help about it.

He was pretty glad, I can tell you, when he saw Watch scouting about the pasture with his nose to the ground.

“Have you found where Silvertip went to?” Nibble asked when the big dog stopped to speak with him.

“No,” said Watch in a discouraged tone. “There was a mist this morning and it’s washed away all the scent. But what do you want of Silvertip?”

“I’ve got to help you catch him,” murmured Nibble.

“You!” exclaimed Watch. “You must be as crazy as a chickadee! Has anything bitten you?” You know dogs are terribly afraid of being bitten by a crazy beast—it makes them go mad, too.

“No. But—but I promised the White Cow that I wouldn’t come back to the barn while Silvertip was alive to chase into it after me—and I won’t stay away from the Red Cow’s baby for

ever and ever. Something's got to happen to Silvertip."

"I wouldn't want him chasing me if I were you," Watch agreed. This sounded more sensible. "But I don't see what the White Cow has to do with it."

"She says Silvertip is really a wolf," Nibble explained, "and if Tommy Peele lets wolves come right into his barn, whether it's calves or rabbits they're hunting, the cows will have to go wild again. That's in the compact between cows and man in the First-Off Beginning."

"Wurr-r-r!" Watch growled thoughtfully. "So it is. But that's my trouble, and the cow's and Tommy's. It hasn't anything to do with you."

Suddenly Nibble remembered something and quoted:

"By dusk and by dawn you shall travel alone,
And all troubles are yours excepting your own.

That's my fortune. The stars told it to Doctor Muskrat the day I left home."

"I understand," Watch nodded wisely. "Well, the trouble about all this is that I can't explain it to Tommy. And we need him. What can you do to Silvertip—except give him a stomach-ache from eating too much rabbit, eh?"

"I can see where he is and what he does. I know how he gets into the chicken coop and where he hid the pullet he stole this morning and the feathers from all the rest he's been stealing——"

"How — when — where!" barked Watch excitedly. "We don't have to tell that to Tommy—we can show it to him. Quick, Nibble! How did Silver-tip get into the chicken coop? Tommy'll be home from school any minute."

So Nibble took him around to the little back door. "That fox is certainly

clever,” sniffed Watch. “He’s gnawed the hook right off. I’ve smelt him around here dozens of times, but I never thought of looking inside of the coop for him.” Then he lifted it with his nose, just as Silvertip had done, but he was too big to crawl in.

It was Nibble who squeezed through and took a hop on to the soft straw of the chicken coop floor. Then he sat up to sniff around. The hens were scratching busily, but the rooster was dozing off a full crop on his perch. Nibble poked his nose into a box of feed and the bird next to him went, “Cut, cut!” That woke the rooster. He opened his eye and caught sight of Nibble’s whiskers.

“Er—er—err, I’m Chanticleer!” he crowed. “And you’re the rascal who stole my beautiful young wife, Specklefeather, this morning! You’re the one who took Stripedwing, the best setting



Nibble visits the chicken coop.

hen ever a rooster owned, and dear little red-wattled Minorca—and all the rest who've been snatched from my perches. Your time has come! I'll show you——” and he flapped down and began to peck poor Nibble and kick him with those long spurs roosters wear on their legs.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute!” Nibble cried. But the rooster wouldn't listen. Then a voice behind Nibble called, “Here, here,” and he darted under the perches and squeezed into a dark nest beside a hen.

“There,” she clucked. “That old bully never comes here. It isn't proper for a rooster to come into the nesting corner. Poor Stripedwing. She used to set in here most of the time because he was so cruel to her. And he killed our son because Minorca was in love with him. I wish the fox had taken him.”

Nibble peeked out again and saw the rooster strutting around as though he'd really done something grand, calling on the hens to admire him. And now he could hear Watch shouting, "Come along, Tommy—come quick!" In a minute more he was barking outside the front door, and Tommy opened it.

"What's the matter?" asked Tommy. Out hopped Nibble Rabbit. "However did you get in here?" gasped the little boy. And with that Nibble slipped through the little back door as neat as you please. Maybe Tommy didn't whistle! And maybe he wasn't still more surprised when he saw the hook all gnawed! But maybe he wasn't maddest of all when Nibble and Watch took him across the field to Silvertip's fence corner, all full of feathers, with poor dead Specklefeather lying in the middle of it!

"The fox!" Tommy exclaimed. "Old

chicken thief; he ought to be hunted with a gun!”

“That’s all right,” Watch wagged his tail. “Now Tommy’ll find the gun and a man to shoot it, but we’ll have to find Silvertip so they can shoot him. I’ll sleep in the haystack and watch the barn, and you see if he’s hidden in the woods.”

So Nibble cocked his own little puffy tail and laid back his ears and scuttled through the cornfield. Because the first one he meant to ask was Doctor Muskrat. And it didn’t take much thumping to wake the doctor.

“My whiskers, but I’m glad to see you,” said the nice old beast as soon as he got his nose out of the water. “I was afraid that fox had really caught you. He came down here for a drink early this morning. He was feeling pretty sick, but he said he wasn’t going to do another thing until he’d pulled

your long ears out by the roots and made a meal of you.”

“Well, he doesn’t want to find me any more than I want to find him,” said Nibble. And he told how Silvertip had followed him into the barn and jumped smash through the window, and what trouble that made for the cows, and the way he’d killed Tommy’s chickens, and how angry Tommy was about it.

“Shoot him? I wish they would.” Doctor Muskrat agreed. “He’s the worst beast in all the woods and fields, and we’ve plenty more to look out for—Slyfoot the Mink and the Marsh Hawk are back, and Grandpop Snapping Turtle is out again—but you’ll have to be mighty careful. You dig yourself a root and stay hidden while I see what the birds know about him.”

So Doctor Muskrat asked every bird who came down to drink if he’d keep an eye out for Silvertip. That was a

great many, too, for whole clouds of them were coming north on every south wind. But they were all so busy about courting and nesting it was three days before Doctor Muskrat had any news. Late in the evening a whippoorwill came dipping down like a great feathery moth and called softly: "Doctor Muskrat!" Then he perched on the doctor's house and whispered: "Silvertip's living in the hollow log that shadows my last year's nest. He's still too sick to hunt anything but frogs and tadpoles and the eggs of us poor ground birds, but the minute he can gallop he's going to get that rabbit. He lies there growling and swearing about him."

Nibble couldn't hear what the whippoorwill said. And that was lucky, because he was lying very still in the Quail's Thicket with those screech owls perched right above him.

CHAPTER X

THE WICKED PLOT OF THE BAD

LITTLE OWLS

AS SOON as the whippoorwill had finished whispering the news, about where Silvertip was hiding, he flew off so quietly that even the doctor couldn't hear him. Then the wise old beast raised his queer, thin call, almost like a whistle, to tell Nibble Rabbit he was wanted, and swam quite as quietly to the place in the bulrushes by the pond where they always met.

But no Nibble came. Nibble Rabbit was still hiding in the Quail's Thicket, listening to Mr. and Mrs. Screech Owl, who were perched right above him.

“That bird's telling him about Silvertip,” said one. “If it had been any

other bird in the woods he'd have spoken so we could overhear him."

"I wish he had," said the other. "We've picked that last hen so clean we'll have to hunt for ourselves if we can't find him. I wonder what that muskrat wants of him. He's been asking every bird who came down to drink for the last three days. I heard Chaik the Jay talking to Cheewee the Chickadee about it just when I was going to sleep this morning."

"What did they say?" demanded Mrs. Screech Owl. The lady owl is always the more thoughtful. They both live in trees. Silvertip never bothers them.

"I didn't understand," said her mate. "Chaik was insisting that they must all hunt hard for Silvertip. He said that it concerned every good friend of Tommy Peele's."

"You pinfeathered idiot!" she ex-

claimed. "Why didn't you tell me that before? That explains why Tommy Peele and his dog were sniffing about Silvertip's fence corner. And that rabbit was with them. He's at the bottom of all this. Something's wrong there. I never knew a wild rabbit to be friends with a dog in all my life. If he'll do that he'll do anything. Silvertip must be warned. We can't let anything happen to him. Besides, think how much he could do for us if he felt grateful."

"Grateful? Not much. A fox is never grateful. But he'd know we were useful and that amounts to the same thing. I wonder why that rabbit doesn't answer Doctor Muskrat?" and Mr. Screech Owl flew cautiously over the doctor's house in the middle of the pond. Back he came to where his wife was still thinking. "He must have meant that call for the whippoorwill,"

he said to his mate. "He's gone to bed."

"We must get some friend who lives on the ground to keep watch for us, too," said the Lady Owl thoughtfully. "Only Silvertip has no friends. He'll eat anybody."

"Excepting old Foul Fang the Rattlesnake," said Mr. Screech Owl. "We could buy Foul Fang's service for a mouse a day. I'll just do that, and you go up to the house, not the barn, mind, and see if you can get a word with that grandson of Ouphe the Rat's who lives there. Silvertip's never hunted him. By the kitchen door—now flutter!" And away they went.

But Nibble waited until he was perfectly sure they had gone before he crept down to talk with Doctor Muskrat in the bulrushes.

And he was a pretty trembly little rabbit. He hopped very carefully, glid-

ing from shadow to shadow like a field-mouse. And the doctor never moved when Nibble Rabbit slipped in beside him; he was listening to the stars as they danced in the pool just exactly the way he had done the night they told him Nibble's fortune. He was muttering:

“Let him who is both young and wise
Beware the killer with lidless eyes.

“Yes, that's all I can make out of it,” said the old doctor slowly. “Now what does that mean, I wonder?”

“I know,” gasped Nibble, “I know—it's Foul Fang the Rattlesnake. The little owls don't want us to catch that fox, Silvertip, because he catches chickens and leaves their bones for the owls to pick. They heard Chaik and Jay and Chewee the Chickadee talking about it. So the he-owl has gone out to hire Foul Fang to help them. They're going to pay him a mouse a day to do it.

And his wife has gone up to the house to bargain with the grandson of Ouphe the Rat who lives in the walls. He's to keep watch on Tommy and warn them what he means to do about Silvertip. But they don't know where Silvertip is."

"That's one good thing," the doctor nodded. "And another is that Silvertip has no friends—nor the owls, either. They only work for him because of what he gives them, and they have to hire their own helpers. Now all the woods know how you help any one who's in trouble, and Tommy Peele has quite a few friends. I can't see whether this warning is for you or for Tommy."

"Tommy, of course. Watch the Dog says he's the cleverest boy in all the world, and Watch is his dog, so he ought to know about him," said Nibble promptly.

"Hm," laughed Doctor Muskrat into

his whiskers. "Well, for a rabbit, you know a thing or two. What cheers me up is this. The stars never warn about something that's surely going to happen. They warn so you can be careful and escape your enemies. Now I'll set every bird who drinks here at the pool to keep watching for Foul Fang. And I'm going over to the stump right now to send out word to all the fieldmice."

"And I'll go back to the Brushpile," said Nibble, "and listen to the Bad Little Owls when they come to their hole in the morning."

Off set the rabbit, lipity-lipity, scudding under the brush and over the shadows and through the grasses, until he snuggled down in a nice little pocket where only a mouse could have found him. And about dawn he heard the screech owls.

"It's all fixed," said the he-owl. "I found Foul Fang, and he knew where

Silvertip was because he'd already smelled him (snakes say they smell any one instead of seeing him), and when I squawk the signal he'll rattle and Silvertip will hear it and run. I didn't find Silvertip because he stayed out hunting too long."

"Fine," said his wife. "And Tommy's gun is all ready to start in the morning."

CHAPTER XI

WHY THE LITTLE OWLS' PLANS WENT WRONG

TOMMY PEELE got up early, very early, on Saturday morning and took care of his cows, for this was the day he was to hunt Silvertip the Fox with a gun. His big cousin Sandy had come with his hound, Trailer. Sandy was to do the shooting. And Watch took Trailer into a quiet corner and remarked: "I don't want to be unpleasant, but it's a fox, not a rabbit we're going to kill, and if you so much as yelp at another thing I'll tear the hide right off you." And Trailer opened his big brown eyes and promised to be very careful.

All the woods and fields were ready,

too, for the fox killed a great many things besides Tommy's chickens. Every one hoped Tommy would kill him; every one but little Mr. and Mrs. Screech Owl and Foul-Fang the Rattlesnake, who was hiding that very minute in the leaves in front of the fox's log.

Nibble wanted to warn Watch, but when he saw Trailer sniffing along beside him he didn't dare. So off he set toward the woods. And Watch and Trailer followed him. Pretty soon Trailer said: "I thought you weren't chasing rabbits."

"I'm not," growled Watch. "He's showing us where the fox is hidden." And maybe that didn't set Trailer wondering.

Just then those Bad Little Owls stumbled past, bumping against the twigs, for they fly badly in the daytime. But they never reached Foul Fang, for

Chaik the Jay, who was another of Tommy's friends, was lying in wait for them. He had his whole family to help him, and what they did to those Bad Little Owls!

Meantime, Nibble was going slowly and carefully on the lookout for Foul Fang. "Stop!" shrieked Chewee the Chickadee from a branch above him. "Foul Fang's right in front of you. I saw him move a minute ago, but I can't see him until he moves again."

Nibble froze in his tracks. Foul Fang was ahead, that strange dog was behind him. But he knew he mustn't let any one pass him. He waited until the dogs were very close, then he darted past them, right to Tommy's feet, calling: "Foul Fang! Foul Fang!"

"Wait!" barked Watch to Trailer. "Something's wrong." And he ran and caught Tommy by the coat to stop him. And of course Trailer and

Tommy's cousin Sandy stopped, too. "What's up?" demanded Sandy.

"I don't know," said Tommy, "but there's my chickadee, and here's my rabbit. Something's frightening them."

"There, there! Look!" squeaked Chewee, dancing about on his twig like a crazy bird. Foul Fang raised his ugly head to sniff at them. Then he wound into his striking coil.

"Bz-z-z!" began Foul Fang's rattle. "Bang-bang!" went Sandy's gun. "A snake! No wonder they were frightened!" exclaimed Sandy. "Lucky that rabbit saw him!"

"Wow-wow-wow!" bayed Trailer, for Silvertip bolted out of his log and began to run.

"Bang—bang!" went the gun. And that did scare Nibble. It sent him flying through the woods, straight for Doctor Muskrat's Pool.

The old doctor was out on his flat

stone; but he wasn't asleep. He was sitting straight up with his round ears pricked and his whiskers stiffened, listening. Ka-flick, ka-flick, came the long bounces of Nibble Rabbit. "Chickadee-dee-dee-dee-ee!" rang out the joyful shout of Chewee, just a little way behind him. "We-e-e-ak!" came the far-away squeak of a fieldmouse. "We-e-e-aw!" echoed one nearer at paw. "R-r-r-r!" drummed a partridge, and a meadowlark who was drinking remarked: "That's a death beat, but he isn't muffling it. Sounds as though he were mighty glad about it."

Ka - flick - thump! Nibble Rabbit landed beside the doctor. "I warned Tommy!" was all he had breath to gasp. But here came Chewee, his wings whirring like a humming bird's, his eyes popping like a crawfish's, as though they had stalks to stand on.

“Whee!” he screeched. “You ought to see—ee—ee!”

“See what?” called Chaik, who was hurrying by to find out what all the noise meant, and he circled back to listen.

“Foul Fang!” squeaked Chewee, turning somersaults on a bulrush. “He’s in three pieces, and his tail is cut off and his wicked scales are squirming in the sun.”

“Yeah!” squawked Chaik, dancing on his wings. “And those Bad Little Owls are hiding in the Brushpile. I’m all mussed up from climbing in after them, but my relatives and I have picked them ’most as clean as the mice picked Nibble’s woodchuck. I’m going back to shout the news at them. Yeah!” And off he flew.

“What did it?” gasped Nibble.

“You silly rabbit,” chuckled Doctor Muskrat. “That ‘bang!’ was a gun.”

“Oh,” and Nibble sat up to think. “The partridge did say Man could make more noise than a summer storm. He certainly can!”

“Why, Nibble!” teased Doctor Muskrat, his shiny little eyes twinkling, “didn’t you ever hear a gun? Every other creature in all the Woods and Fields has been waiting for that noise to celebrate the death of Silvertip the Fox. That was what Tommy Peele brought out here to kill him.”

“Did it?” demanded Nibble Rabbit. He knew that it pretty nearly stunned one small and scary rabbit he could tell about.

“Not if it bit Foul Fang in three pieces,” answered the wise old doctor. “That takes two bites, one for each noise. Silvertip isn’t bitten yet.” “Shot” was what he meant, but the Woodsfolk don’t use that word.

“How do you know he isn’t bitten?”

squealed Chewee the Chickadee. He was twirling and tumbling about the bulrushes because he was too happy and excited to keep still. "He jumped right out under the nose of Trailer, that hound Tommy Peele brought to help his own dog Watch. And the last I saw he was just about two steps ahead of Trailer's jaws."

"Ssh!" warned Doctor Muskrat, and he cocked his ears. Far, far away they could hear Trailer calling, "Where, where?" And Watch answered: "Isn't this fox?" and Tommy Peele's cousin was shouting: "Hie out, Trailer! Find him!"

"You see," said the doctor, "Silver-tip's saved his skin this time. But we'll find him again."

He was right. Late in the afternoon Tommy came trudging along with his head down, too unhappy to listen to the "Thank you" the meadowlarks were

singing, and the one Chewee brought from the partridge. For every creature that lived or nested on the ground was more than grateful to be rid of Foul Fang. Tommy's big cousin Sandy was carrying his gun, and his dog Trailer was so tired he could scarcely crawl. Watch was tired and sheepish besides. He came down for a drink and whispered: "See where Silvertip sleeps. We'll be out again to-morrow."

"I wonder how he got away," said Nibble, stamping impatiently. He'd come from eating a dandelion head in the Quail's Thicket to see what Watch had to say.

"I can tell you," came the soft whisper of the whippoorwill who had skimmed a drink as he flew across the pond, leaving a wake of tiny, quiet ripples. "There's still deep water in the ditches. Silvertip splashed along in it to hide his trail and then sneaked into the cul-



Silvertip hid under the culvert until Trailer circled past.

vert where it runs under the woods road. The frogs say he almost drowned. But he shivered in there with only his nose out until Trailer circled past. Then he ran back in the ditch on the other side and jumped over to a tree that was broken off by the terrible storm. He climbed up the limbs to the broken stump—it's ten good wingbeats above the ground—and curled up in a woodduck's nest. And he ate every egg she'd laid, too. Now he's coming this way."

"My stars, Nibble!" exclaimed the doctor, "you can't sleep here. Warn Watch and hide somewhere up near the barn!" So off Nibble ran.

CHAPTER XII

HOW LONG EARS HEARD BAD NEWS

THE minute the whippoorwill said that Silvertip the Fox was coming right back into the very woods Tommy Peele and his cousin Sandy and the dogs had just driven him out of, they knew he did it for just one reason: he was bound to catch Nibble. So that was no place for a sensible bunny. It was really pretty scary.

But you know Nibble. He can't stay frightened, because he's so terribly curious. Before ever he hunted himself a safe place to sleep he had to sneak into the Brushpile and listen to the Bad Little Owls. They were just creeping out from beneath it, where they had

hidden away from Chaik Jay and his family.

“Are you all right?” asked Mr. Owl. “I feel better since I slept, but those jays gave us a terrible mauling.”

“My poor wings!” mourned his wife. “I am ashamed to be seen in them.”

“What’s a lot worse, we’ll have hardly a thing to fly with, until our fall feathers come in,” he complained. “My wings aren’t very bad, but I’ll never be able to steer until my tail grows.”

“I’m going to watch Chaik’s nest,” scolded the Lady Owl, “and let Mrs. Hooter drag his wife out by the claws as soon as ever she gets back here. Her owlets are out already, so it won’t be long. And I’ll smash every one of Chaik’s eggs with my very own beak—see if I don’t!” Mrs. Owl was still nearly crying over her ruffled feathers.

“No, you won’t!” snapped her hus-

band. The husband, you know, is always the timid one of an owl family. "We'd have Tommy Peele shooting us next! What do you think made Chaik take after us, eh? He was helping Tommy. That boy wouldn't have a chance of finding that clever fox if half the Woodsfolk weren't helping him. It's a bad thing to have any man so friendly with them." Of course it was, for a bad bird like the owl or a bad beast like Silvertip.

"It certainly is," she agreed. "Tommy would be hunting them all just as hard as we do if it weren't for that rabbit. It's all his fault. We've got to get rid of him. Let's tell Silvertip about the flat stone where he thumps for Doctor Muskrat."

"Let's find his hole," said her husband. "Every mouse in the Woods and Fields knows about it; they went there this spring for woodchuck fur to make

a charm against us owls. I'll show them if it can keep me from catching one. Then we'll offer to let him go if he tells us."

"Yes," she agreed, "and then we can eat him afterward, so he won't run and warn that rabbit."

"Thank you so much for all this information," said Nibble to himself. "If Silvertip stays in the woods tonight I can sleep very comfortably in the haystack."

Nibble slept in the haystack that night, but he didn't sleep any too well, because the news of Foul Fang's death had travelled 'way up to the barn and the mice were celebrating. Besides, he had to sleep with one ear up, listening for Watch.

He heard the old dog padding past early in the morning, before even the birds were awake, and thumped to call him. In another minute Watch and

Trailer the hound, who was with him, were sniffing at the door of Ouphe the Rat's old tunnel under the hay. "What's on your mind?" the big dog whined softly. "Trailer won't chase you."

"I know he won't," Nibble chuckled. "I'm not going to run for him. I'm going to stay snuggled up in here until I hear him busy after Silvertip."

"There," said Watch proudly, "Trailer, I told you Nibble would find him."

"But I don't see how we lost him," Trailer insisted. "He simply disappeared in the middle of a hot trail. I never lifted my nose from it."

"The whippoorwill said he took to water and then climbed up into the woodduck's nest in the top of that fallen tree," said Nibble. "But why didn't the gun catch him? That's what I want to know."

“The gun’s a stupid thing,” Trailer explained. “It bangs twice and then it has to be fed again before it will do anything more.” (He knew it was no use to tell Nibble about putting fresh shells into a double-barrelled shotgun, because even Watch, who was a very wise dog, didn’t understand.) “My man Sandy was so excited over shooting the snake that he forgot to feed it. He didn’t hear me bark until Silvertip and I were out of sight in the brush. And Silvertip was gone before he found me again. That gun has to use his eyes to see with and his legs to run with, and no man’s fast enough to chase a fox. That’s why Watch and I think we can get him just as easily if we go out alone.”

“Yes, and I don’t like taking Tommy Peele to meet strange snakes in strange woods,” said Watch. “It worries me so I can’t keep my mind on what I’m doing.”

“Of course,” Nibble agreed. “Well, last night I overheard the little screech owls in the Brushpile—my paddy-paws are good for more than to scrub my ears with, I can tell you. They’re so quiet even the owls didn’t hear them, and they said they were going to tell Silvertip to watch the flat stone where I thump for Doctor Muskrat, or my hole. He’ll be one place or the other. And please tell Doctor Muskrat I’ll go around to the far side of the pool to meet him.”

“All right,” promised Watch. And off went the dogs with their tails wagging. “I tell you what,” growled Trailer, “that rabbit is a great help to hunt with.”

CHAPTER XIII

HOW THE GREAT HUNT ENDED

NIBBLE RABBIT cuddled down comfortably in the bottom of the haystack. Pretty soon he heard Trailer bark. "Aough! Here, Watch! Quick! Catch him!"

"They didn't get him that time, either," thought Nibble as Trailer's voice settled down to the hunting call. "But I guess Silvertip's too busy to hurt me, and I must tell Doctor Muskrat to keep away from that flat stone." So off he went to the woods as fast as ever his paddy-feet would carry him.

But he didn't go straight to Doctor Muskrat's Pool. He ran around the

lower end of the Prickly Ash Thicket, where his hole was, and jumped across the brook. Then he came up on the far side of the pool and hid in a clump of willows. Deep in the woods he could hear Trailer, still baying. Everything else was very still. He thumped softly.

“M—m! Eh? Is that you, Nibble?” came the startled voice of the old doctor. “Watch sent me over here and I fell asleep. We sat up all night watching Silvertip, Whippoorwill and I. He slept curled up on that rotten log just behind your hole.”

“Then the little owls did find a field-mouse,” said Nibble. “They said they’d make one show it to them and then eat him so he couldn’t tell me.”

“Well, that’s just what they tried to do,” and the doctor’s eyes twinkled, “but he managed to wriggle away when he got there and pop right into it. And he dug along the big root that runs up

into the mouse tunnels and was down here for me to put a moss-seed poultice on his claw wounds while they were still watching your doorway. A doctor knows pretty much everything that goes on, I can tell you."

"And Silvertip?" asked Nibble.

"Oh, that hound all but caught him!" the doctor exclaimed. "He came sneaking out when Watch called me, and he was so busy trying to hear what one dog had to say that he forgot all about the other. He squeaked like a frightened mouse."

"How exciting!" Nibble flicked his tufty little tail at the thought of it. "I had Watch tell you not to go back to that flat stone because the little owls know about it. Those bad little birds will do anything to help Silvertip. They bargained with Foul Fang the Rattlesnake, and they bargained with the grandson of Ouphe the Rat. They

might bargain with Slyfoot the Mink to watch it."

"There's someone watching it this very minute that the little owls didn't bargain with," answered Doctor Muskrat. "It's Grandpop Snapping Turtle. He moves just a little closer every day, and then he settles down in the mud so exactly like a stone himself, that even I can hardly tell the difference. He's very polite—but we'll keep a safe distance away from him. What's that?"

For a shadow was floating over the old doctor's pool.

Nibble and Doctor Muskrat crouched very low among the willow stems as it sailed silently above them. It was just daybreak, when mice scuttle down to drink and crayfish are stiff with the night's chill—the best hunting time of the day for the marsh hawk. The woods were very still; they couldn't

hear even the distant barking of the dogs.

Pretty soon Nibble put up his head. "It's the whippoorwill," he whispered, flashing a signal to the bird. "He's got news of Silvertip! Do you suppose they've caught him?" He was so excited that he squirmed inside his furry skin.

"We'll know in a minute," said Doctor Muskrat, as the whippoorwill dropped quietly to the ground.

But he fluttered in surprise when he saw the doctor. "Great beetles!" he exclaimed. "I just saw your nose poking out of the water by the flat stone."

"Not his," said Nibble. "We can't go there, because the Bad Little Owls who help Silvertip are watching it."

"Yes," put in the doctor, "and so is Grandpop Snapping Turtle, who helps himself."

“O—ho!” said the whippoorwill. “I thought it was you, hiding from the little owls. They’re in the Quail’s Thicket.”

“And Silvertip?” asked Nibble.

“Silvertip’s too clever for those dogs. He’s got away,” said the whippoorwill, sadly. “I know just how you feel. It’s awful to know he’s always after you. But you did me a good turn when you found that rattlesnake and showed it to Tommy Peele. And Tommy did me a good turn when he shot it. I’ll help you all I can. Only when a fox is smart enough to run along the top of a fence to hide his trail, what dog will ever catch him?”

“There’s just one thing sure,” said Doctor Muskrat, “he’ll catch himself with his own cleverness one of these days.”

“Listen!” breathed the whippoorwill. “He’s come back to the brook on

his own trail. Now he's walking in the water to hide his footsteps while he crosses to the Quail's Thicket to see if the little owls have found Nibble. Isn't that smart?"

Ka-splash, ka-splash, ka-splash, ka-splash, went the cautious feet of the fox. He was wading up the other side of the pond, nearer and nearer to the flat stone. Ka-splash—he was right beside it. Ka-splash. "Yah!" he screamed. "A trap! Urr—waur-r-r! Leggo, leggo!" he snarled, biting the thing that gripped his leg.

Then slowly, surely, they saw him dragged deeper and deeper into the pool.

"Oh!" gasped Nibble. "How awful! That was—Grandpop Snapping Turtle!"

"Lip, lip, lip," sang the ripples against the shore. They broke in rings about the poor fox's nose as it disap-

peared. They travelled clear across to the farthest shore where Nibble Rabbit and Doctor Muskrat were crouching in the willows, and they whispered "Silver-tip's gone."

"Poor Silvertip," gasped Nibble. "I wouldn't have minded a bit if the dogs had caught him—but to be drowned—Ugh!" And he shivered.

"That's all in the way you look at it," answered the doctor. "You're used to the idea of having something run you down and kill you. But we muskrats are quite used to the idea of being eaten by snapping turtles. If I'm not clever enough to get away it doesn't matter to me which gets me in the end."

"But he's terribly dangerous," Nibble insisted. "I should think you'd be afraid to dive into the same pond with him. We must catch him. We can get Tommy to help us."

"There's no need of that," argued

the wise old beast calmly. "I've grown up in this pond. And Grandpop Snapping Turtle has been paddling around in it every summer since I was born. He's never troubled me because so far I'm smarter than he is. When I get old and stupid perhaps he will."

"But why should there be anything to catch us?" persisted Nibble. "Why can't we make a compact with them, like the cows made with the dogs, or why can't we make a compact with Man to help us kill them? Then it would be like Mother Nature meant to have it in the First-Off Beginning."

"You forget that they both were Mother Nature's own children to start with. Even she can't make a compact with the Things-that-came-from-under-the-earth like Grandpop. And those are the worst enemies we have. Besides, I think even Mother Nature has changed her mind about that first plan.

Now she's growing something she never thought of."

"What's that?" asked Nibble, trying hard to guess.

"Brains! we're learning to think. You're safe enough if you know all your enemy knows and then think for yourself besides. It's only when he's cleverer than you are that he can catch you. If we had no enemies we'd still be as stupid as plants—no, stupider—because they had to learn to take care of themselves, too."

"I see," said Nibble, slowly. "Silver-tip was safe on land because he was smarter than any one else. He got caught when he took to the water because Grandpop Snapping Turtle knew more about that than he did."

"Exactly," agreed Doctor Muskrat. "It was perfectly fair. Look at Man. He had the most enemies and the least help from Mother Nature. Now no

one can hurt him but himself—he still has that much to learn. But he’s wiser and safer than any one else in all the world. And his enemies taught him.”

THE END

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